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[HOME](#)

[ABOUT us](#)

[CURRENT ISSUE](#)

[ACHIEVES](#)

[INDEXING](#)

[SUBMIT PAPER](#)

[AUTHOR GUIDE](#)

[CONTACT](#)

## Modern Science and the Quran on Mother's Role in the Family

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### ABSTRACT

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Is mother a woman who gives birth and has the responsibility of physical and emotional care for children or simply a 'female parent'? Every society is made up of blocks of family units. The stronger each block is, the stronger the structure of the society and thus families are the building blocks upon which rests the fate of society. The family is the basic institution of the society which, according to the teachings of Islam, plays a fundamental role in the making of Muslim personality. For the development of a good family, the mother plays a vital role. Most importantly it is easy to bear children but it is difficult to raise them well.

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### Introduction

The Arabic word "*Umm*" means mother and it is extensively used in the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet of Islam. Essentially it means root and source. This is because a child is in the womb for six to nine months and extracts his/her physical needs from the body of the mother. All the stages of birth from



conception, till pregnancy including the three stages i.e. pre-embryonic, embryonic and fetal stages and also the postnatal care are beautifully defined in the Holy Quran. The Holy Quran provided guidance regarding lactation and childcare centuries ago, which is focused by World Health Organization nowadays. The paper will focus on the central role of mother in consolidating the family in the light of modern science as well as the Holy Quran.

The responsibilities of women in Muslim society are not limited whether she may be a daughter, sister, wife or mother. They are the nurturer of future generation. Women's role is central to the establishment of a family and the atmosphere that will prevail therein. For the development of a good family, the mother plays a vital role. The Arabic word "*Umm*" means mother and it is extensively used in the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet of Islam. Essentially it means root and source. This is because a child is in the womb for six to nine months and extracts his/her physical needs from the body of the mother. The mother's role in Islam is high in esteem and so majestic and noble that she has been called the "School of Nation". Allah has given a blessing and trust to mother to nurture, protect, guide and educate the *Ummah*. The first seed of the knowledge is planted and developed at home under the care of mother.<sup>1</sup>

The Prophet of Islam (peace of Allah be on him) is reported to have said:

"Woman is the care-taker of all the members of her husband's family and his children. And for this reason she will be questioned on the Day of Judgement".<sup>1</sup>

### **Fetal Growth and Development**

Child growth starts before birth, since conception in mother's womb and passes through three stages i.e. pre-embryonic stage (first two and a half months), embryonic stage (three to eight weeks) and fetal stage (eight weeks till birth). During early stages of development, major organs begin to develop containing all the genetic material inherited from parents.<sup>2</sup>The Quran says:

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“He makes you in the wombs of your mother, in stages, one after another, in three veils of darkness”<sup>3</sup>

The three veils of darkness from the embryologic point of view may refer to the anterior abdominal wall, the uterine wall and the amniochorionic membrane.

**Embryogenesis** is beautifully explained in the Quran with three terms- *al- nutfah* (male and female gametes), *al- alaqah* (zygote and its developmental stages) and *al-mudhghah* (somite stage).<sup>4</sup> The Quran says:

“O mankind! If you have a doubt about the resurrection, (consider) that We created you out of dust then out of sperm, then out of a leech like clot, then out of a morsel of flesh, partly formed and partly unformed.”<sup>5</sup>

While explaining this verse, Abdullah Yusuf Ali says that if the human beings really have doubts in their minds about the life after death, they have only to turn their attention, either to their own nature, or to the nature around. How wonderful is their own physical growth, from lifeless matter, to seed, fertilized ovum, fetus, child, youth, age and death! How can they doubt that the author of all these wonderful stages in their life here can also give them another kind of life after the end of this life? Or, if they look at external nature, they see the earth dead and barren, and Gods fertilizing showers bring it to life, growth and beauty in various forms. The Creator of this great pageant of Beauty can surely create yet another and a newer world.<sup>6</sup>

Fetal growth begins with **fertilization** that is fusion of male and female gametes, leading to formation of zygote, occurs in ampullary region of fallopian tube of mother. The Quran says:



“He it is who created all things in the best way and began the creation of man from clay, and made his progeny from an extract of despised fluid (*sulalah*).”<sup>7</sup>

While interpreting this verse some commentators of the Quran say that man is asked to contemplate his own humble beginning. His material body (apart from life) is a piece of earth or clay, which is another term for primeval matter. Matter is therefore the first stage, but even matter was not self –created. It was created by God.<sup>8</sup> Then comes life and the reproduction of life. We are still looking at the purely physical aspect, but it is now a stage higher; it is an animal. Its reproduction is through the sperm or semen, which is a quintessence of every part of the body of man. Yet it issues from the same part of his body as the urine, and is therefore despicable in the man’s sight. It is a living cell or cells, summing up so much ancestral life history.<sup>9</sup>

“So let man consider of what he has created. He was created of gushing water.”<sup>10</sup>

On being questioned by a Jew as to how man is created the Prophet is reported to have replied “Oh! Jew, man is created by mixing of male and female *nutfah*”.<sup>4</sup>

Formation of testicles is mentioned in the Quran as:

“And remember when your Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their loins, their seeds”<sup>11</sup>

This indicates that the origin of progeny is at the region of back where embryonic testicles are formed, as proved by embryology that testicles are formed from cells underneath the kidneys at the back (sperm is produced in the testicles) and then descends towards lower abdomen at the last weeks of pregnancy.<sup>4</sup>



Implantation takes place in mother's womb which is considered best place for growth and protection of developing embryo (*makeen*) as mentioned in the Quran:

“The which (embryo) we placed in a place of settlement, firmly fixed for a period (of gestation), determined. For we do determine, for we are the best to determine (things).”<sup>12</sup>

These verses of the Quran were interpreted by the Quranic scholars beautifully. They say that the growth in the fetal stage is silent and unseen. The fetus is protected in the mother's womb like a king in a castle; it is firmly fixed, and gets the protection of the mother's body, on which it depends on its growth until birth.<sup>13</sup> The period roughly of nine months and ten days is subject to many adjustments. In fact throughout our pre-natal as well as post-natal life there are wonderful and nicely balanced adjustments of which we are ourselves unconscious. Should we not turn in love and gratitude to God our Creator?<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the life in the womb, in relation to the life after birth, is an allegory for our probationary life on earth in relation to the external life to come. Perhaps, also, our state when we are buried in the tomb also suggests an allegory to the life in the womb, in relation to the life in the Hereafter, as interpreted by Abdullah Yusuf Ali.<sup>15</sup>

After passing through the stages of *alaraqah*, *mudhghah*, bones and muscles are formed. According to Abdul Majeed al-Zindani, human embryo by the beginning of seventh week acquires a skeleton mostly cartilaginous which gives form to the body of embryo. At twelve weeks gestation, centres of ossification are present in most of the bones. At around eighth week of gestation, human embryo develops cartilaginous skeleton which is surrounded from all around later on by muscles (*fakasaun al izama lahman*).<sup>3,16</sup>

Studies suggest that early brain development of embryo is greatly influenced by maternal behavior during pregnancy. Chronic anxiety and



depression have an impact on the developing fetal brain and significant changes in infant development and long term problems.<sup>17</sup> Maternal genes have specific influence over fetal growth. In general, maternal height, which represents uterine capacity and the potential for growth, is a major determinant of fetal size. Maternal diet, calorie intake and metabolic functions all play important role in supplying oxygen and nutrients to the developing fetus.<sup>18</sup>

### **Breast-feeding**

The breast-feeding is the act of milk transfer from mother to baby that is needed for the survival and healthy growth of the baby into an adult. It creates an imitable psychological bond between mother and baby, enhances modest cognitive development; reduces risk of neonatal complications and better maternal physical and mental health.<sup>19</sup> Breast-feeding is the first and most important emotional role of mother and child and at the same time hugging a baby meets their biological, emotional and mental needs.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, breast-feeding is economically beneficial for families, employers and our healthcare system as a whole. Keeping in mind its benefits, American Academy of Pediatrics and World Health Organization recommended breast-feeding till 6 months of age. The American Heart Association (AHA) advocates exclusive breast-feeding for the first six months of child's life. Breastfeeding is the "Gold standard" for infant feeding. WHO and UNICEF in 1992 started BFHI (Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative) with ten steps for protecting, promoting and supporting breastfeeding in children.<sup>19,20</sup> First week of August is celebrated as World Breastfeeding Week since 2013 with the theme of supporting mothers through peer counseling.



Kull *et al.* (2002) in Sudan studied “Breast milk and allergic diseases in children” and concluded that exclusive breastfeeding will have preventive effects on various allergic diseases in infant like asthma, dermatitis, allergic rhinitis, etc.

Arnez *et al.* (2003) Germany, studied “Breastfeeding and obesity in children” and concluded that breastfeeding had a short term yet durable effect on preventing from childhood obesity.

Caspi *et al.* (2007) London, studied effects of breast milk on IQ by genetic changes on the metabolism of fatty acids and concluded that breastfed children have higher IQ compared to those who are not, due to the presence of unique fatty acids in it.<sup>20</sup>

More than fourteen centuries ago, Islam recommended every mother to breastfeed her children up to the age of 2 years if lactation period is to be completed. The Quran says:

“We enjoined upon man to be dutiful to his parents. His mother bore him in weakness upon weakness, and his weaning lasted two years. (We, therefore, enjoined upon him): “Give thanks to Me and to your parents. To Me is your ultimate return.”<sup>21</sup>

The above verse interpreted by scholars as the set of milk teeth in a human child is completed at the age of two years, which is therefore the natural extreme limit for breast-feeding.<sup>22</sup>

The Quran considers breast-feeding as maternal duty and *jihad* so precious and valuable that has obligated a husband to appreciate the mothers and reward her. The Quran says:

“And if they carry (life in their wombs), then spend (your substance) on them until they deliver their burden: and if they suckle your (offspring), give them their recompense: and take mutual counsel together, according to what is just and reasonable. And if ye find



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yourselves in difficulties, let another woman suckle (the child) on the (father's) behalf." <sup>23</sup>

Totally eight verses in the seven chapters of the Quran are related to mothers milk.<sup>20</sup>

"If they (i.e. the fathers) wish that the period of suckling for their children be completed, mothers may suck their children for two whole years." <sup>24</sup>

Regarding above verse, Maulana Maududi says that this injunction applies to the condition where the couple have separated because of divorce, or *khul* or *faskh* (annulment) or *tafriq* (repudiation as a result of judicial decision) and the woman is nursing a child. <sup>25</sup>

"And we have enjoined upon man, to his parents, good treatment. His mother carried him with hardship and gave birth to him with hardship, and his gestation and weaning (period) is thirty months. And when he is grown to full maturity reaches the age of forty, he prays: " My Lord, dispose me that I may give thanks for the bounty that You have bestowed upon me and my parents, and dispose me that that I may do righteous deeds that would please You, and also make my descendents righteous. I repent to You, and I am one of those who surrender themselves to You." <sup>26</sup>

While interpreting the above verse, Abdullah Yusuf Ali says that the time of weaning was stated to be at the age of two years, i.e. 24 months. That leaves six months as the minimum period of human gestation after which the child is known to be viable. This is in accordance with the latest ascertained scientific facts. The average period is 280 days, or ten times the inter-menstrual period, and of course the average period of weaning is much less than 24 months. The maximum period of breast- feeding (2 years) is again in accordance with the time that the first dentition is ordinarily completed in a human child. The lower milk incisors in the centre come out between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> month; then come out the milk





teeth at intervals, until the canines appear. The second molars come out at 24 months, and with them the child has a complete apparatus of milk teeth. Nature now expects him to chew and masticate and be independent of his mother's milk completely. On the other hand it hurts the mother to feed from the breast after the child has a complete set of milk teeth.<sup>27</sup>

“ forbidden to you are your mothers, your daughters, your sisters, your paternal aunts and maternal aunts, your brother's daughters, your sisters daughters, your mothers who have given suck to you, your suckling sisters, your wives mother, and the step daughters- who you are your foster- children, born of your wives with whom you have consummated the marriage; but if you have not consummated the marriage with them, there will be no blame upon you (if you marry their daughters)”<sup>28</sup>

The Quran further says:

“On the Day when you witness it, the suckling woman shall utterly neglect the infant she suckles, and every pregnant woman shall cast her burden, and you will see people as though they are drunk, when they are not drunk; but dreadful shall be Allah's chastisement”.<sup>29</sup>

“We suggest to the mother of Moses: “Suckle your child, but when you fear for his life cast him into the river and be not fearful nor grieve, for we shall restore him to you and make him one of the Messengers.”<sup>30</sup>

By slight reflecting on words and phrases of the verse above, we find that God asked the mother of the Moses to give her first milk (colostrum) to her child after giving birth to him. The milk is not only nutritious but has medicinal properties too.<sup>20</sup>

Islam strongly recommends breastfeeding but recognizes that for various reasons, and the time of weaning is expected to be a mutual decision by both parents. The Quran says:



“And we had already forbidden the breasts of the nurses for the child (so seeing the girl): “Shall I direct you to the people of a household that will rear him with utter sincerity?”<sup>31</sup>

Scholars have used this beautiful verse to confirm acceptance of wet nurses for new borns.

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “For the baby, no milk is better than breast milk”<sup>20</sup>

Besides unlimited benefits to baby, breast-feeding is beneficial to mother too. Lower rates of breast cancer incidence seen in feeding mothers (Jern Storm *et al.* 2003, Landon), reduced risk of ovarian cancer, cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, postpartum depression, feeling of satisfaction with motherhood and contraceptive benefits were also reported.<sup>19,32</sup>

### **Infant’s Development**

In Islam, the environment has a role in child education. According to the Quran, every human being for its growth, development and perfection needs the cooperation and assistance of other human beings. He also needs the cooperation of the nature and environment as well. Without this cooperation, neither his physical development is possible nor mental development. Therefore Islam tries to create environment of mutual cooperation through the implementation of law and creating the sense of morality in the mind and thoughts of the people.<sup>33</sup> Children are easily influenced by their surroundings. Family plays important role in developmental behavior of children as their major part is spent with the family and parents are the lifeblood of preparing environment for a family. It is the parents who sacrifice their lives for the growth, education and well being of their children. This is the reason why Islam treated the full respect of the parents a solid base for the consolidation of the family. The Quran repeatedly used the term *ihsan* to elaborate the desirable



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treatment with the parents. The Quran *ihsan* applies to the excellence in the treatment and well being of the parents. This includes obedience and social and economic care as well.<sup>34</sup> The Quran says:

“And know that your properties and your children are but a trial and that Allah has with Him a great reward”<sup>35</sup>

Allah’s Messenger is reported to have said: “educate your child 100 years before birth”<sup>36</sup>

Prior to the birth of child, parents must prepare a suitable place to raise the child as best as possible. The world foremost to a child is his parents home. Early education is very crucial to shape the life of a person which begins with childhood.<sup>11</sup> The Quran declares:

“And Allah has extracted you from the wombs of your mothers not knowing a thing, and He made for you hearing and vision and intellect that perhaps you would be grateful.”<sup>37</sup>

The Prophet of Islam has well glorified the status of mother and declared her the most deserving person for excellent treatment by the children. He is reported to have asked his companions:

“Should I inform you of the biggest of the sins?” we said: “why not O! Messenger of Allah. He said: “associating anyone with Allah and disobeying the parents” the Prophet was resting on then he got up and said: beware! and telling a lie and witnessing the lie. Beware! And telling a lie and witnessing the lie.” He used to repeat till I said (in my heart perhaps he will not be silent).<sup>38</sup> Abdullah Bin Masood has reported that I asked the Prophet: “which deed is the most deserving and pleasing to Allah?” He said: “performing the prayer in time” He asked: “ then after that?” He said: “then obeying to the parents” then He asked: “what is after that?” The Prophet said : “fighting in the way of Allah”. The narrator says: Had I asked more? He would have pointed out more.<sup>39</sup>



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## Conclusion

A Muslim mother has a valued and dignified role. Her contribution is acknowledged and appreciated. Her unparalleled gifts to the child are indescribable as beautifully explained by *Imam Zaynul Abidin* in *Risalah al-Huqooq*:

*It is the right of your mother that you should appreciate that she carried you (in her womb) the way nobody carries anybody, she fed you the fruits of her heart which nobody feeds anybody. She protected you (during pregnancy) with her ears, eyes, hands, legs, hair, limbs, (in short) with her whole being, gladly, cheerfully, and carefully; suffering patiently all the worries, pains, difficulties, and sorrows.*

*Till the hand of God removed you from her and brought you into this world. Then she was most happy, feeding you forgetting her own hunger, clothing you even if she herself had no clothes, giving you milk and water not caring for her own thirst, keeping you in the shade, even if she had to suffer from the heat of the sun, giving you every comfort with her own hardship; lulling you to sleep while keeping herself to awake.<sup>40</sup>*

The Prophet of Islam has enjoined goodness to the mother even before the father. A man once came for advice to him, as to who he should be good to. The Prophet advised him to do good to his mother again. Three times the man asked, and three times the Prophet told him to do good to his mother. At the fourth time, the Prophet told him to do good to his father. Also the Prophet has said: "*Paradise lies under the feet of mothers*".<sup>40</sup>

Modern science and the Quran both reveal the key role to be played by mothers in the proper growth and physical and spiritual education and training of their child. It is only the mother that gives birth to her child even at the cost of her life. She sacrifices everything and suffers from the worst difficulties eagerly for the safety, care and development of her child. Unfortunately, the children when become independent economically, usually turn into unsympathetic and even cruel sometimes



to their mothers. This situation must be replaced through proper education and mobilization.

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